



# STRATEGIC FORUM G

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## Pessimistic, Polarized, and Politicized

# Attitudes within the Russian Officer Corps

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## Growing Military Discontent

### Conclusions

- The once-pampered Russian officer corps—angry and resentful over its loss of status and decline in living standards—feels abandoned by virtually all political institutions. Most officers are pessimistic about the future of both Russia and the army.
- The officer corps is polarized between those attracted to moderate reformers and those who favor hardliners. The gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” is increasing. The latter are particularly susceptible to ultranationalism.
- Officers are highly critical of President Yeltsin and many blame him for the military's precarious position. Most would oppose using the military to defend the President.
- The officer corps, even more than the civilian population, is dismayed at the breakdown in law and order. Although officers support democracy in principle, they condemn Western-style democracy and support authoritarian rule as a way to restore stability.
- As with the populace at large, a majority of officers express nostalgia for the old Soviet Union and advocate restoration of some sort of union, particularly a Slavic union. Most feel that the three Slavic republics will be reunited by the end of the century.
- Most military officers see the West as a threat. As a result, most officers strongly advocate maintaining a balance in strategic weapons. They see the top priority for Russian foreign policy as that of restoring Russia to the status of a superpower.

Many Russian officers feel abandoned by key political institutions. This sense of betrayal is evident from survey results for mid-level and senior officers, who were asked which state institutions expressed the interests of the army and servicemen. Nearly half (49%) say that none of the institutions defended their interests; an additional 15% were unsure.

Officers also feel rejected by the populace at large. Although the army is among the most trusted institutions in Russia, this trust has not translated into popular respect for officers—at least not in the eyes of the officers themselves. Only 11% of mid-level and senior officers feel that officers enjoyed popular respect; only 4% say that general-level officers are respected by the populace.

The officer corps' sense of betrayal is also connected to its bleak assessment of military capabilities. Nearly two-thirds of mid-level and senior officers agree that Russia is “so unstable and economically weak that even its military potential cannot guarantee security.” Over half believe Russia would not be able to rebuff an aggressor.

Most officers are highly critical of military reform. Over half of mid-level and senior officers say that the Armed Forces had changed for the worse as a result of military reform. One in four report that reform had gotten bogged down, resulting in no changes to the military. Only a tiny minority (well under 5%) see military reform as successful.

Another factor underlying the growing military malaise is a precipitous decline in living stan-

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dards. Like many Russians, military officers say that they support the concept of economic reform and do not want to restore the command economy. However, like their civilian counterparts, they are highly critical of how economic reform has degraded their own living conditions.

The military (like many other budget-funded groups) has been particularly hard hit by the economic decline of the last several years. Military families are largely dependent on officers' paychecks, which often arrive months late. Military salaries have kept up with neither inflation nor the wages of their counterparts in the border guards, federal intelligence service, and Internal Ministry. Defense Ministry officials claim that monthly salaries of officers in these three agencies are 1.5 to 2 times higher than Defense Ministry officers. Defense Ministry officers, particularly those withdrawn from the Baltic, have also been affected by housing shortages; an estimated 165,000 officers do not have their own apartments.

Nearly three quarters of mid-level and senior officers judge their salary to be bad or very bad; only a few officers rate their salaries as good or very good. The officers also rate the medical services for their families as low. Less than a quarter describe their overall living conditions as good or very good; one in three describe their living conditions as poor or very poor.

### **Bleak View of Russia's Future**

Like their civilian counterparts, officers assess Russia's current economic and political situation in gloomy terms; neither group sees much prospect for improvement in the future:

- One percent of the mid-level and senior officers say that the current economic situation in Russia is good. Eighty percent judge it to be bad or very bad. Only a small proportion (13%) expect the economy to improve over the next year.
- One in ten mid-level officers predict improvements in the level of production or

living standards for the near future; 74 percent predict further increases in inflation; 82% predict higher unemployment; 78% predict increases in crime.

- A minority of officers (less than one in five, depending on the wording of the question) expects any improvement in the political situation in the next year.

Pessimism also emerged when mid-level and senior officers assessed the probability of specific events over the next two years. Most dismiss the possibility of a fascist takeover, a return to socialism, a military coup, or a return to the Cold War. Nearly half assess the "reinforcement of democracy" as probable and over one in three predicted achievements in the market economy. However, nearly half assess dictatorship as probable; and over half predict a catastrophe at a nuclear power station. Three quarters say that civil unrest and strikes in different regions of Russia are probable. By contrast, only about one in four civilians see such civil unrest as probable.

### **Haves Vs Have-Nots**

The gap is widening between the "haves" (those assigned to elite units or those who have enriched themselves through illegal sales of military property) and the "have-nots."

Official Defense Ministry studies have found that some officers withdrawn from Germany have brought with them consumer items (such as cars) purchased in Germany and then re-sold in Russia for a large profit. The relative prosperity of these officers has produced tremendous antagonism between the officers who are profiting from their German tours and everyone else.

Yuriy Deryugin, a retired military sociologist, notes the emergence of three distinct social groups within the military:

- junior officers, from lieutenant to captain, who are searching for a way out of the military;
- "serving" officers from major to major

### **About the Authors**

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general, who do not see a future outside the military;

- staff officers serving in the "Arbat Military District" (Defense Ministry and General Staff headquarters), who are well-placed to take care of themselves.

### A Polarized Officer Corps

These differences are reflected in deep divisions within the officer corps. Deryugin described "serving" officers as standard-bearers of regulation, tradition, and order. They are highly skeptical of Russia's move toward a market economy; 60% oppose the liberalization of prices. They also have conservative political views; 40% support ultra-nationalist ideas.

Similar attitudinal differences emerge in comparisons of mid-level officers (who have been harder hit by declines in military living standards) and senior officers. Mid-level officers express a greater sense of alienation from existing political institutions than more senior officers.

These differences in perception are also reflected in differences in political preferences.

- Some officers support reform-minded leaders. Yavlinskiy, a moderate reformer who has become increasingly anti-Yeltsin over the last year, garnered the highest trust rating of any political figure among mid-level and senior officers. Yavlinskiy's party also garnered the highest level of support among these officers, narrowly beating out the conservative Communist Party and the Agrarian Party (which is closely allied with the Communists).
- The officer corps, as a whole, tends to be more supportive of hardline politicians than civilians. Among those attracted to such groups, support for ultranationalists like Zhirinovskiy is apparently stronger among junior officers. Mid-level and senior officers, by contrast, are more distrustful of the flamboyant LDP leader and more attracted to conservative groups like the Communist Party and hardliners like former Vice President Rutskoy.

### Dissatisfaction with Yeltsin Regime

Military officers, like their civilian counterparts, are highly critical of Yeltsin's job

performance. Only 17% of mid-level and senior officers approve of how Yeltsin is performing his job as President—59% disapprove his performance. Over half do not trust Yeltsin, while just over one in four say they trust him.

Asked who bears the main responsibility for the mistakes made in military policy since 1985, 30% of mid-level and senior officers name Yeltsin. One in ten say that the President represents the interests of the army and the military. Only one in four would approve the use of military force inside Russia to defend the President; over half would oppose use of the military for this purpose.

They are also displeased with their Defense Ministry leadership. Less than one in five of mid-level and senior officers express trust in Defense Minister Grachev; over half express mistrust. By contrast, both General Lebed (the outspoken commander of Russia's 14th Army who has repeatedly challenged both Yeltsin and Grachev) and Deputy Defense Minister Gromov (a conservative military leader viewed as a potential rival to Grachev) garner over fifty percent trust ratings.

### Weakness of Democratic Values

Military and civilian observers alike are dismayed at the erosion of law and order of the past several years. Both groups see some sort of authoritarian rule as a way out of the existing chaos. A solid majority (62%) of mid-level and senior officers agree that Russia needs a "strong hand" within the next few years to get out of the current chaos. Responding to a slightly different question, 71% of civilians in a nationwide survey agree that Russia needs a leader who will put things in order with an "iron hand."

Military officers, like their civilian counterparts, tend to be ambivalent about democracy. On the one hand, they express support for democratic principles. For instance, an overwhelming majority (77%) of mid-level and senior officers agree with the statement: "Russia should more resolutely than before uphold the values of democracy and human rights." On the other hand, when asked about the impact of "Western-style democracy," the response was very different. Two out of three agree that "Western-style democracy will not do any good for Russia, because it leads only to corruption and disorganization."

Where the officers corps seems to diverge from civilians is in the values that underlie these

attitudes. Military professionals tend to place a higher priority than civilians on law and order. Servicemen also tend to be less tolerant when it comes to provisions allowing people to express alternate opinions. They are also less supportive of private property rights than other groups.

### Nostalgia for the Old Union

The growing disorder and uncertainty have made Russian officers and civilians alike increasingly nostalgic for the relative stability of the old Soviet Union. An August 1994 nationwide survey of the general populace found that 68% of the respondents agree that the collapse of the Soviet Union is a great misfortune. Similarly, 70% of mid-level and senior officers agree that "the disintegration of the Soviet Union is a misfortune for our country." Indeed, a surprisingly large minority (44%) agree that the breakup of the USSR ought to have been prevented by all means, including use of military force; over 50% disagree with this statement.

Like other Russians, most officers favor the restoration of some form of the old union or the creation of a greater Russia. 71% of mid-level and senior officers feel that Belarussia will be reunited with Russia by the end of the century; 61% feel that Ukraine will be reunited with Russia by the end of the century.

### Suspicion of the West

Military officers, like their civilian counterparts, are ambivalent about the West and its influence on Russia. A solid majority in both groups support cooperation with the West. Among civilians questioned in an August 1994 poll, 69% agree that it is in Russia's interest to work with the United States and other Western powers. Similarly, 57% of mid-level and senior officers advocate a partnership relationship with the United States; 20% favor an alliance between the two powers; and 14% want the relationship to be that of friendship. Over three-quarters identify the establishment of partnership relations with the United States and other European countries as an important or very important priority for

Russian foreign policy.

However, both military officers and civilians question Western motives and fear that the West is trying to exploit Russia's current difficulties. A poll of the civilian population conducted in August 1994 found that 55% agree that the Western powers really want Russia to be a colony; 59% blame Western pop culture for corrupting Russian youth. This suspicion of the West was also apparent among mid-level and senior officers, who endorse democracy, but identify "Western-style" democracy with chaos and corruption.

The officer corps takes an even more conservative view on the threat from the West, although both groups continue to see the West as a threat. When asked to describe current (vice ideal) relations between the United States and Russia, a plurality (39%) of mid-level and senior officers describe the United States as a rival of Russia. Although only a minority see the United States as an opponent (protivnik), an even smaller minority see the United States as an ally or a friend. On another question (which listed the countries and asked respondents to identify each country as friend, enemy, or neither), 32% of the respondents describe the United States as an enemy (vrag).

Most officers feel Russia should maintain a balance with the West in terms of strategic weapons. Only 4% of mid-level and senior officers agree that the West is no longer a potential aggressor and that Russia can reduce all of its arms, including strategic weapons. Half of these officers say that if relations between Russia and the United States become complicated, they would recommend taking a firm stand and avoiding concessions. Only one in five would advocate concessions and compromises in this scenario.

These same sentiments were evident when these officers were asked about priorities for Russian foreign policy. Over half of the respondents name the restoration of Russia's status as a superpower as a very important goal; an additional quarter name it as an important goal. By contrast, few officers see procurement of economic aid from the West or Russia's participation in Partnership for Peace as top priorities.



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